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Counterinsurgency Warfare Approach to Iran

by

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It is a scary to think about the implications of terrorists or insurgents armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that could make the events of 9/11 look like a pinprick.¹ However, “independent, non-state-aligned terrorist groups are no match to a state sponsor of terror that has the geopolitical clout of being the world’s fourth-largest supplier of oil,” such as Iran.² The implications of a nuclear Iran are threatening for nations consistently on the receiving end of hateful rhetoric, such as the United States and Israel. Ayatollah Khomeini called the United States the “Great Satan”³ and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad regularly calls for the annihilation of Israel.⁴ And as unacceptable as a nuclear Iran may be, the United States and the international community have failed to halt Iran’s march toward nuclear independence ever since its secret nuclear program was uncovered in 2002.

This failure is not for a lack of thinking and writing about the problem and potential solutions. There is no end of literature and opinions on the subject, such as whether a nuclear armed Iran is even a threat, actions to take to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons, and deterrence options if they acquire nuclear weapons. Opinions run the full spectrum. Former Israeli intelligence chief Danny Yatom took one extreme position by calling for the entire world to take military action to prevent Iran from getting a bomb.⁵ Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang takes the other extreme regarding diplomatic efforts in that “even though there's only [a] 1 percent chance such measures would succeed, we should make [a] 100 percent effort.”⁶ I propose that the answer involves a new approach somewhere in the middle of those extremes.

In the forward to *Iran’s Nuclear Option*, Stephen Tanner suggests that the enemies of the United States in the post 9/11 era require the Cold War rulebook to be thrown out the window.⁷

While not all Cold War theory is obsolete in my opinion, I agree that the United States faces a new type of enemy in Iran and a new rulebook is required. I argue that a counterinsurgency rulebook fits Iran. This paper will look at Iran as an insurgent as described in David Galula's book, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, and provide a new approach for the United States and international community to face Iran.

The Islamic Revolution occurred in 1979 and established a theocratic regime in Iran. But this regime has bigger plans of a revolution for the region and the world. "The driving force of the regime is a long-held ambition to spread its repressive brand of Islamic extremist rule throughout the Middle East and beyond."⁸ In effect, the Islamic Republic is an insurgent in the world. Iran's behavior parallels that of an insurgent as described by Galula's nature and characteristics of revolutionary war.

First, Galula explains that revolutionary war is primarily an internal conflict and that the insurgents take action to seize power.⁹ He further paraphrases Clausewitz by stating that "insurgency is the pursuit of the policy of a party, inside a country, by every means."¹⁰ The current regime clearly meets this definition. Insurgents pursued Ayatollah Khomeini's policy inside Iran for an Islamic republic with "direct participation in government by Shiite Islamic theologians, a principle known as *velayat-e-faqih* (rule by a supreme Islamic jurisprudent)."¹¹ Khomeini was against the anti-clerical policies of the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and felt the Shah had forfeited "Iran's sovereignty to its patron, the United States."¹² Khomeini used every means necessary and the Shah's government collapsed in February 1979 due to "mass demonstrations and guerrilla activity."¹³

However, the Iranian regime's revolution did not end in 1979. Khomeini had greater aspirations "of all Muslims seeking to establish Islamic government everywhere in place of

tyrannical regimes.”¹⁴ The regime’s global mission and expansionist doctrine is clearly spelled out within the Iranian constitution that “with due attention to the Islamic content of the Iranian Revolution, the Constitution provides the necessary basis for ensuring the continuation of the Revolution at home and abroad.”¹⁵ The preamble also describes the ideological mission of the armed forces to “extend the sovereignty of God’s law throughout the world.”¹⁶ Iran’s current leadership, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad, have the same ideology and worldview started by Ayatollah Khomeini. Ahmadinejad even saw his election in 2005 as “a new Islamic revolution.”¹⁷

A second major characteristic of revolutionary war is that the objective is the population.¹⁸ Because the insurgent does not generally have superior forces for conventional battle or conquest of territory, “logic forces him instead to carry the fight to a different ground,” which is the population.¹⁹ If an insurgent is able to control the population and gain its support they will win the war because “the exercise of political power depends on the tacit or explicit agreement of the population or, at worst, on its submissiveness.”²⁰ Initially, the population for Khomeini was Iran. However, as explained above regarding their constitution and expansionist goals, the population is actually the world.

A third major characteristic is the power of ideology.²¹ Galula explains that “the insurgent cannot seriously embark on an insurgency unless he has a well-grounded cause with which to attract supporters among the population.”²² Again, as explained above the overall cause is to see a worldwide theocracy of Islam. But, because this cause is not so “well-grounded” the regime claims oppression by the West, namely Great Britain, the United States and Israel, as a cause to rally the population. Ahmadinejad blames Great Britain for the creation of the state of Israel due to Balfour Declaration in 1917 which “recognized the legitimacy of a Jewish homeland in

Palestine.”²³ And deep in the heart of many Iranians is how “Iran’s first democratically elected leader was tossed out of the government in a coup organized by the CIA and its puppet.”²⁴ In one of Khomeini’s books, described as “a handbook for revolution,” it states that “if the rulers of the Muslim countries...join together like the fingers of one hand...then a handful of wretched Jews (the agents of America, Britain, and other foreign powers) would never have been able to accomplish what they have.”²⁵ This idea has continued to the present with Iran wanting to join Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq to dominate the entire Middle East.²⁶ Following fighting between Lebanon and Israel in 2006, Khamenei gave a speech saying “Lebanon was supposed to be turned into a center for Western culture but this country has instead turned into a center for Jihad and resistance and this is exactly the opposite of what the Western hegemonic powers wanted.”²⁷

The last characteristic to discuss is that the revolutionary war remains unconventional until the end.²⁸ Galula explains that after the insurgent acquires enough strength and forces one would think the war should turn conventional.²⁹ However, Galula proposes that “if the insurgent has understood his strategic problems well, revolutionary war never reverts to a conventional form.”³⁰ This is because subversion and guerrilla activity “facilitate the operations of the regular army” and “amplify their effects.”³¹ Furthermore, “having acquired the decisive advantage of a population organized and mobilized on his side, why should he cease to make use of an asset that gives his regular forces the fluidity and the freedom of action that the counterinsurgent cannot achieve?”³²

The Iranian regime clearly understands the power of unconventional war, namely insurgency and terrorism. After Khomeini’s regime took over the government he conducted one of the regime’s first acts of terrorism with the student takeover of the United States embassy and held American hostages from November 1979 to January 1981.³³ The regime was born from

insurgency and today openly provides funding, training, and weapons to Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.³⁴ Further examples of terrorism include the 1983 Marine barracks truck-bombing in Beirut killing 241 Marines and a separate truck-bombing two miles away killing 58 French peacekeepers.³⁵ The 1985 hijacking of TWA Flight 847 during which terrorists killed Navy petty officer Robert Stethem is another prime example.³⁶ More recent examples include support of the 9/11 attacks by providing al-Qaeda “with passports, safe haven, intelligence assistance, secure communications, and training in explosives and airline hijacking.”³⁷ And ever since the 2003 US invasion of Iraq “the Iranian regime has provided massive funding, training, and weaponry to militant groups engaged in terrorist activities against coalition forces.”³⁸ Author Alireza Jafarzadeh in his book *The Iran Threat* says it best, “Iran is ground zero for international terrorism.”³⁹

Parallels can be found in Galula’s four prerequisites for a successfully insurgency. Those prerequisites are: a cause, weakness of the counterinsurgent, geographic conditions, and outside support.⁴⁰ As previously discussed, the cause is “exporting its extremist brand of Islamic rule to the rest of the Middle East and the world.”⁴¹ The weakness of the counterinsurgent is necessary for the insurgent to conduct operations; otherwise, the insurgent would be vulnerable to every means at his enemy’s disposal.⁴² The weakness of the West is apparent due to lengthy entanglements in Iraq and Afghanistan. The inability to find international consensus on dealing with Iran is also a weakness. Geographic conditions play favor to Iran’s insurgency as well. They are a large country in the center of the Middle East with “roughly one tenth of the world’s supply of oil and natural gas.”⁴³ Their southern border dominates the “34-mile wide Strait of Hormuz, through which 40 percent of the world’s oil supply regularly” flows.⁴⁴ Additionally,

the majority of Iraq's population lives near Iran's 900-mile border, making it easy to "smuggle arms, explosives, and all kinds of consumer goods."⁴⁵ Outside support comes from numerous organizations and agencies. Russia, China, and Pakistan have all provided assistance to Iran regarding nuclear technology.⁴⁶ North Korea has provided missile technology.⁴⁷ Furthermore, these same countries all have resource, economic, and national interests providing motivation to support Iran.

Iran also parallels Galula's insurgency doctrine according to the Orthodox pattern. In this pattern the "revolution consists not merely in overthrowing the existing order" but also in carrying out a complete "transformation of the country."⁴⁸ This pattern is consistent with the regime not only taking power of Iran but its continued war against the West. The steps of this pattern are: creation of a party, united front, guerrilla warfare, movement warfare, and annihilation campaign.⁴⁹ The first three steps have been covered previously regarding cause and terrorist actions. The movement warfare step is where "the enemy must be met on his own ground; an insurgent regular army has to be created in order to destroy the counterinsurgent forces."⁵⁰ This step occurred as the regime took over and Khomeini created the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).⁵¹ The IRGC was a new militia responsible for restoring order in the cities and "supporting Khomeini's monopoly on power, which meant hunting down and murdering opposition groups."⁵² The IRGC considers itself "part of a global network that is leading the way for the Islamic revolution to spread beyond Iran's borders."⁵³ A specific unit of the IRGC was created, the Qods force, specifically "to run special operations—terrorists attacks—outside Iran and to train Islamic terrorist groups."⁵⁴ The last step, annihilation campaign, occurs "as the over-all strength of the insurgent grows while his opponent's decreases" and "a series of offensives aiming at the complete destruction of the enemy will

constitute the last and final step.”⁵⁵ Fortunately, this step has only occurred inside of Iran as the regime assumed power. However, it is this step combined with the rhetoric and fundamental Islamic ideology that makes a nuclear Iran so scary.

If the Iranian regime can truly be looked at as a global insurgency, then what does Galula’s laws, principles, and goals of counterinsurgency warfare offer for the international community to deal with Iran? A key counterinsurgency idea is protection of the population to help gain their support. “The counterinsurgent cannot achieve much if the population is not, and does not feel, protected against the insurgent.”⁵⁶ To protect the population it is best to “isolate the population as much as possible, by physical means, from the guerrillas.”⁵⁷ The United States is partially isolating Iran physically through the current operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. “The real isolation of revolutionary Iran will come when it is drowned in a larger sea of liberal, accountable governments in the region. As democracy takes hold in Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran’s dictatorship will come under increasing pressure.”⁵⁸ And should Iran acquire nuclear missiles, one strategy for protecting the world is to develop an extended nuclear deterrence for countries in the Middle East and emplacement of missile defenses for the region. Deployment of missile defenses “could help deter an Iranian attack and provide self-protection assets in the event Iranian offensive missiles were fired in anger.”⁵⁹

Another key counterinsurgency idea involves limited use of military force with a focus on the population taking responsibility. Following this principle a direct military strike of the leadership or the nuclear facilities is out of the question. This would only rally more of the population to the cause of the insurgents. A potential strategy is to “empower the pro-democracy forces to change the regime.”⁶⁰ In 1979 Khomeini stole the revolution from other anti-shah groups.⁶¹ The Iranian people “envisioned a free society that reversed the oppressive system of

the shah, and these revolutionary ideas are very much alive today in the hearts and minds of Iranians in Iran and throughout the world,” not the spiritual dictatorship that ensued.⁶²

A third major idea of counterinsurgency warfare is “to lay the groundwork for the eventual dissociation of the population and the insurgent.”⁶³ This idea refers to the difficult task of getting the international community to cut off ties with the Iranian regime. Potential options include “efforts to increase the isolation of Tehran’s rulers through economic and political sanctions on an international level.”⁶⁴ However, the sanctions would have to be “all-encompassing to be meaningful” and “would have to affect the interaction between Iran and countries like Russia, North Korea, Pakistan and China.”⁶⁵

Admittedly, applying Galula’s *Counterinsurgency Warfare* against a nation state, such as Iran, is not an easy connection and one that requires more than eight pages. This argument requires more research to support each point, specifically, regarding how counterinsurgency warfare can provide new options, if at all. Also, each author cited has an agenda that may bias their opinion and research. However, my intent is summed up by Jafarzadeh: “since the overthrow of the shah in February 1979, the United States has struggled to understand the nature of the regime and what makes it tick.”⁶⁶ I am suggesting that Iran has presented a new type of “hybrid” nation-state-as-insurgent that requires the United States and international community to conduct “counterinsurgency diplomacy” to be successful. Ultimately, this paper tries to look at Iran through a new lens to better understand the situation and encourage further study to develop an appropriate strategy.

Endnotes

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- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Yossi Melman and Meir Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran*, Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2007, p. 53.
- ⁵ Global Security Newswire, "Iranian Troubles Seen Aiding West in Nuclear Dispute," http://gsn.nti.org/gsn/nw_20100310_2260.php, Wednesday, March 10, 2010
- ⁶ Global Security Newswire, "Bills Could Tighten U.S. Sanctions on Iran," http://gsn.nti.org/gsn/nw_20100309_2489.php, Tuesday, March 9, 2010
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- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Milton M. Schartz, *Iran: Political Issues, Nuclear Capabilities, and Missile Range*, Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2006, p. 4.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
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- ¹⁵ Alireza Jafarzadeh, *The Iran Threat*, Palgrave Macmillian, 2007, p. 55.
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- ¹⁸ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, Preager Security International, 1964, p. 4.
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- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 8.
- ²² Ibid.
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- ²⁴ Shirin Ebadi, *Iran Awakening*, Random House, 2006, p. 13.
- ²⁵ Alireza Jafarzadeh, *The Iran Threat*, Palgrave Macmillian, 2007, p. 42.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 72.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, Preager Security International, 1964, p. 9.
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- ³² Ibid.
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- ³⁵ Kenneth R. Timmerman, *Countdown to Crisis*, Crown Forum, 2005, p. 22.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p.27
- ³⁷ Ibid., p.3.
- ³⁸ Alireza Jafarzadeh, *The Iran Threat*, Palgrave Macmillian, 2007, p. 81.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 61.
- ⁴⁰ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, Preager Security International, 1964, p.11.
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- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 27.
- ⁴⁵ Alireza Jafarzadeh, *The Iran Threat*, Palgrave Macmillian, 2007, p. 83.
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- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
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- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p. 61.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 16.
- ⁵⁵ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, Preager Security International, 1964, p. 39.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 50.
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- ⁶⁰ Kenneth R. Timmerman, *Countdown to Crisis*, Crown Forum, 2005, p. 313.
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- ⁶⁶ Alireza Jafarzadeh, *The Iran Threat*, President, Palgrave Macmillian, 2007, p. 210.

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